OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

You'd Better Enjoy It Now

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James 4.13–5.6 reminds us how easily we can focus on temporary things without regard to eternal matters. James is not plowing new ground; the world has always included some who live for what they can accumulate now, sometimes at the expense of others. An example of such people is found in James 5.1–6. Because the failure to account for the reality of God and his will is so important, we should reflect on the warning they received in more detail, especially since we live "in the Western world, where amassing material wealth is not only condoned but admired" (Moo 2000, 210).

The Condemned Rich

Verse 1 *demands* our attention. Literally translated, James commands the "rich" to "weep, wailing for the miseries that are coming upon you"; the imperative, "weep" (κλαύσατε, *klausate*), is intensified by the participle, "wailing" (ὀλολύζοντες, *ololuzontes*). "Weep" (Lam 1.1–2; Isa 15.2, 5; etc.) and "wail" (Isa 15.2–3; Amos 8.3) are used in the prophets to depict the reaction of the wicked when the day of the LORD arrives; in fact, "wail" is used only in the prophets, and always in a judgment context (e.g., Isa 13.6; 14.31; 16.7; 23.1, 6, 14; Ezek 21.12; Hos 7.14; Zech 11.2), Seen against the prophetic backdrop and in view of the entirety of James 5.1–11, the "miseries" (ταλαιπωρία**,** *talaipōria*) James mentions refer to the condemnation the rich will receive on the day of judgment.

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Verse 4 reveals that the "rich" (πλούσιος, *plousios*) in this text are the wealthy landowners, a group "of people frequently criticized in the OT, Jewish literature, and the wider Greco-Roman world for their greedy acquisition of land and their exploitation of those forced to work on the land for them" (Moo 2000, 210). But, while James is specific in his identification, we should understand that the wealthy landowner is but one example of the kind of person James has in mind.

Prophetic language again provides the key to seeing that James is making a theological statement here, not issuing a blanket condemnation of everyone who is wealthy. We know Israel did not always honor the Mosaic expectation that the people were to show concern for the poor (Exod 23.10–11; Lev 25.29–23). Later OT and Jewish writings often denounced the rich, occasionally using the term as a synonym for "the unrighteous" (cf. Prov 10.15–16; 14.20). In the NT, Luke tells us that Jesus emphasized the same idea in his teaching, as in his warning about the threat of riches to genuine discipleship (cf. Luke 6.24–25). And, as illustrated elsewhere in James, the NT generally condemns the misuse of riches, not wealth per se (cf. Jas 1.10; 2.1–4). In the present text, he is addressing a particular group of "the rich" who were afflicting some of his readers with trials (cf. 1.2–4; 5.7–11). What should especially arrest our attention is that he gives no hint of a positive outcome for them.

Reasons for Condemnation

Moo identifies and elaborates on the four reasons for James's condemnation of the rich. James declares them in "a rapid-fire series of short clauses and sentences" in verses 2–6 (Moo 2000, 212). First, they were using their wealth selfishly: "Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days" (vv. 2–3). The descriptors James employs had come to be used in Scripture and Jewish writings to stand for anything temporary ("rotted," "moth-eaten") or decayed ("corroded"). James utilizes them to tell the rich that, however much security they thought their wealth guaranteed them, they were nonetheless doomed because their riches would not last (cf. Job 16.7; 19.20; Matt 6.19; Job 13.28; Ezek 24.6, 11–12; Sirach 14.19; 29.9–11). Notice that the verbs in verses 2–3 are in the perfect tense, used to suggest a condition the rich would not admit or, alternately, in a prophetic sense to express an outcome so certain that it was as if it had already occurred (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 220; Davids 1982, 175). The irony is stark: the things they were counting on for security "will be evidence against you," the treasure "you have laid up … in the last days" (v. 3). James intends for them to understand that judgment day accountability is surely coming.

Second, they were cheating their workers of their wages (v. 4). Those who laid claim to covenant promises were ignoring its commands about ethical behavior toward the poor (Lev 19.13; Deut 24.14–15; cf. Mal 3.5). We should recall that in their world, laborers were paid at the end of each day (cf. Matt 20.1–16) and "failure to pay workers promptly could jeopardize life itself" (Moo 2000, 216). The workers' cries might be ignored, or even unheard, by the rich, but "the Lord of hosts" was hearing and would make things right.

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Third, in another echo of the prophetic tradition (e.g., Ezek 16.49), they were pursuing self-indulgent lives (v. 5). Necessary to seeing James's point are the easily overlooked words, "on the earth" that suggest a contrast between the lives of ease the rich were enjoying and the torment that awaited them. The words also point to the reversal of fortune to be experienced by both the rich and the poor they were mistreating (cf. Luke 16.25). The pleasant outcome the rich thought their goods were securing would in fact be "a day of slaughter."

Fourth, they were oppressing "the righteous one" (τὸν δίκαιον, *ton dikaion;* v. 6), a term that has been understood by some to refer to Jesus. Others have taken it to refer to James ("James the Just"), an interpretation that requires a corresponding belief that the letter was written by his followers after his death (Moo 2000, 218–219). But it probably does not refer to any specific person, but rather to the very personal effects of the landowners' malicious actions. They had "condemned" (καταδικάζω**,** *katadikazo*) the righteous one, a word with judicial overtones (cf. Mark 14.64). James's use here again echoes OT and Jewish writings where the rich are depicted as using their influence to bring about what amounted to legal robbery (e.g., Ps 10.8–9; Amos 2.6–8; Mic 2.2, 6–9; cf. Wisdom 2.6–20). They had also "murdered" (φονεύω**,** *phoneuo*) him, a charge that could refer to actual cases or to the practical outcome when the poor were deprived of a way to live (cf. Sirach 34.25–27).

As in verse 3, James's statement is ironic. The righteous person "does not resist you." The rich are winning now, a reality that doubtless added to their confidence in their means of security. But the time is coming when they will not win.

Lessons from James's Warning

We'll highlight three lessons from this text. First, coupled with 4.13–17, the warning in 5.1–6 reminds us of Jesus's teaching that "it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19.23 NASB 2020). There are two reasons for this. First, the rich can more easily develop a sense of self-dependence, trusting in things that promise security and believing the illusion those things promise (cf. Luke 12.15, 18–20). Second, the rich can more easily expect to have their own way, the opposite of the submission required to be part of God's reign.

Second, James 4.13–5.6 reminds us of the danger of the slippery slope. The specific sin in 4.13–17 is that they did not take God into account in daily life. In 5.1–6, that habit has morphed into active opposition to the ways of God.

Third, in context, the reference to knowing and doing "the right thing" in 4.17 is the use of wealth; 5.1–6 is an example of what that means in practice. Notice that, while James does condemn their active oppression (5.4, 6), his emphasis is on the fact that they were ignoring the needs of the poor (cf. 1.9–11, 27; 2.1–7). His admonition reinforces the importance of Jesus's teaching in the verses that follow the parable of the rich fool. In Luke 12.22–31, he warns that so much of what we worry about are things that don't last. But in verses 32–34, he says that it's

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permissible to have and enjoy material blessings, provided we understand that they should be invested in good deeds that benefit the poor about whom God cares so much.

As we reflect on these lessons, we recall that the modern exemplar of someone who learned the error of miserliness that ignores the needs of others is Ebenezer Scrooge. But James's warning is more forceful, making explicit what Charles Dickens only implies: the Lord of hosts is watching and will call us to account.

Works Cited

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Additional Thoughts on James

"Because Jesus is Lord, Caesar (or any other earthly or heavenly authority) is not. The Judge whom one fears is not Caesar, but the one who is 'at the door' (Jas 5:9). The 'glorious Lord' is not a Roman official, but Jesus. God's agent in the world is not Caesar (the person viewed as so much an agent of the gods that he would in most cases eventually be deified), but Jesus 'the Anointed One.' And given that James is against divided loyalties ('double-minded' is not a good term for him, nor is any other both—and loyalty), it is unlikely that he would have tolerated divided loyalties. One cannot read James in the context of the Greco-Roman world without realizing the political import of both his statements and his attitude."

~ Peter H. Davids. 2014. *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*. Biblical Theology of the New Testament. ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger. Zondervan, 75

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